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Legacy

by Maureen Pilkington

The crowd at Holy Sepulcher Cemetery had no order or shape, just pockets of space here and there as if the sun was burning holes through the mass, completely missing two tall targets, Stef and her mother Constance. Stef noticed the heat made her mother's unworldly pink lipstick seep upwards and outwards into the lines around her mouth, a frame of sorts for the word dirt, the word her mother kept whispering to her all through the service. And wouldn't it be hilarious if it was plain old dirt that would make her mother forget all the shit that went back and forth between her and her sister Linnie before she died?

"Look at the dirt," she said it again, her face crunched up like when she had a sour ball under her tongue.

Stef looked around, getting creeped out by the fresh mounds nearby.

"There's a seam," she said, and in the palm of her hand she drew the seam that went down the center of the coffin, her thick gold ring with the diamond strip all around, distracting Stef. She adored the ring, and her mother waved it in front of her as often as she could.

Constance was on a soft-spoken tirade: "Must be made of goddamn fiberglass," she said, looking over the heads in front of them. "That's what the bastard bought."

Aunt Linnie's born again Christian husband.

The pall bearers continued throwing fistfuls of dirt over the coffin with Father Boyle over to the side reading from his prayer book like he knew anything about love, human love, and the dirt, Constance insisted, was getting stuck in the seam, and surely the dirt was falling in between the crack over her sister who died like a rabbit under the porch, over her deflated stomach, over the only decent dress she ever had that Constance bought for this occasion.

Stef figured her mother would have sprung for the coffin, too, to spread some butter over her guilt, but Uncle Jeff wanted to buy it himself with his own \$500 bucks so everyone would feel sorry for him.

There was always a situation turning over in Constance's mind that irked her, forcing her to reach for the candies in her purse.

"You know what that bastard said to me this morning with my poor dead sister in the same room?" Constance pulled the skin above her daughter's elbow. "Steffie has become a woman. She could rival my wife—before the

boys, before the lymphoma.”

“Since when do you give a shit what he says,” Stef said in her usual under-the-breath response, trying to recover from how her mother referred to Aunt Linnie—my *poor* dead sister—like she was all heart.

It was clear to her that her mother wasn’t passing on a compliment. This was a warning. Stef was tall and broad, her hair black and straight, so unlike the Northern Italian colors of her mother’s family. She couldn’t see any similarity. It was nice to feel her mother studying her at that moment, affectionately rearranging her hair behind her shoulders, studying her slender nose, her full cheeks, even if she was only searching for the reference Uncle Jeff made.

Stef had no contact with the Olsens for five years now because of the various silent treatments inflicted on both sides. But as she imagined Aunt Linnie lying in the fiberglass box, her rust colored curls still plump because hair, they say doesn’t die; she knew she should be there.

Constance shoved her purse into her daughter’s hands, her breath full of butterscotch. “My baby sister,” she said and left her.

Stef felt ridiculous, holding two, one of them clearly old ladyish, so big with the used tissues and mess inside all smelling of Madam Rochas perfume, even the candy. Stef got one of the gooey Lifesavers and watched her mother twisting her large body from one side to the other, squeezing through, putting a hand gently on a shoulder, or an arm as she passed. Stef could see the guilt all ribbony and flowing down her back like the tails of an Easter hat.

Constance wore a classic black suit with the white piping and Stef tried to picture her mother at her own father’s funeral, when Stef was only five like her cousin Tommy now. Was Constance carrying on about something then? Was she truly thin the way she described herself? When she put Stef to bed as a child she told her the story of her dad’s funeral, how the pallbearers could hardly carry a man of his size on their shoulders. Constance worried they would drop the hand-finished oak casket, with the creamy taffeta interior, popping the seal, and her husband would roll out onto the hardened soil like the trunk of an oak tree, his eyes unglued and staring straight ahead.

She told her daughter it was the *what-ifs* in life that would kill her.

Stef couldn’t remember a thing about that day, so she inserted the image of her father falling and rolling on the ground.

She had been away at boarding school when got the news about Aunt Linnie, but from what she gathered through her mother’s too-busy-to-talk phone calls, her mother was there for Linnie over the past year. To be by her side. Closed her shop for a while, not that she ever had normal business hours anyway. She went back to her sister because of the cancer, the cancer she fully expected. Aunt Linnie just turned forty, the beautiful one, and she was the first to go, summoned up, no doubt by their dead

mother. Aunt Linnie was Grandma Dotty's favorite. She was everybody's favorite, except, maybe, for Uncle Jeff's.

Four bright blonde heads kept turning back in Stef's direction, even Tommy, with shocking colors around their necks: pinks, neon greens, oranges, like surfer boys, their clothes bagging on them.

She had never gotten this kind of attention from the Olsen boys before.

Stef felt like a giant in a black sheath dress in kitten heels and two purses overlooking the townspeople, her eye on one troublemaker. Away at school she never had this feeling, this creeping sense that something would go wrong any minute.

She watched her mother move closer to the coffin and Father Boyle looked up from his prayer book. Was it her mother that distracted him, or, did the clouds remind him of the whipped cream that would soon be floating on top of his Irish coffee? That must be how priests got off, she thought, if they weren't helping themselves to young boys.

Constance watched her mother approach the coffin; her hair, fried from all the bleach, was becoming undone from her usual chignon. She made it up to the coffin and stood in front of it like a soldier too tired to salute.

Father Boyle continued talking about Linnie's disposition throughout her illness; her dedication to education in the town of Pelham where Jeff Olson was now teaching eighth grade math over at the high school. Of course, Father never mentioned why everyone just wanted to shake her sometimes.

The expression drained out of his words when he looked over to Constance.

Stef watched Uncle Jeff leave his spot in the front row as he approached her mom with a secret-service gait, his body aging into the shape of an extra large egg, wearing the same Aviator type sunglasses on the sunken bridge of his nose like he always did. He stood at the side, his hands behind his back.

Her mother made the sign of the cross and Stef was relieved. People will think she is distraught and will understand the gesture.

The gesture grew.

Constance raised her foot and placed the pointy toe of her shoe against the casket. Not kicking, exactly. Pressing. Tapping. A wake-up-sleepy-head kind of tap.

Stef could barely stand; the heat and embarrassment penetrated her from all angles. All she could do was watch her mother's bloated calf in her silvery stocking catching the sunlight like the scales on a striped bass.

The oldest Olsen, two years older than Stef, left his seat and practically ran over to Constance and offered her his elbow. This is going to be good. She'll flip him on his ass, the mood she's in.

As Stef watched the exchanges between the two of them, the whispers, the offering of a tissue, she felt that old jealousy ream through her. She observed joy in her mother's face, like a god damn proud grandmother, taking the nineteen year old boy's skinny arm like the staff of some annoying teen god.

He calmed her.

Stef could barely hold herself up, watching her mother rest her head on the boy's shoulder after he escorted her to a seat in the front row.

After the service, still in her seat, her own aggravation still swimming, Stef shook her mother's purse to listen for the car keys so she wouldn't have to put her hand in there. She hadn't much practice driving, being away--she was into it more, before she got her license. The thought of driving her mother's boat of a car in the funeral procession back to the Olsen house was just boring.

She walked over the lawn, carefully stepping around the vibrations of the souls buried six feet under, to the car parked far from the others. She took off her shoes, turned up the radio and the AC and got in the line, with the two purses on the passenger seat.

Constance was being helped into the family limousine.

When Stef arrived at the Olson house, she saw Tommy outside on the swing set. He was toe-headed like the rest of them. She could stare at him forever, playing in his world, astonished that he was the baby she once held in her arms. She envisioned picking him up, holding him, ignoring her mother and the rest, taking him for a ride in the car. She walked to him, with one of the candies in her hand. "Hey big T.J. Olsen. Remember me? Steffie? Bet you don't!" She stooped down, her strong legs almost ripping the seams of her dress. He looked at her and ran into a hut embedded in the corner of his play area.

Stef recognized the chandelier in the dining room visible from the front door. It was from her mother's shop, used to hang in the confederate section, a row of small gold eagles perched around the rim of the top tier. And, there was her mother, the light from above hitting her sparkly ring, handing out punch in plastic cups.

The house was unusual for this part of Pelham, with its roominess and parquet floors. Grandma Dottie bought them the house but the Olsens couldn't afford the upkeep. The oldest Olsen, the ever annoying, spotted her and waved, acting less confident than he did handling her mother. She pointed upstairs signaling she had to use the bathroom. She saw Aunt Linnie's slippers on the bottom step.

There was nothing more scary then seeing the shoes of a dead person.

Stef walked up the stairway barefoot, the sisal rug hurting her feet like the last time she was here when she was eleven. Her mother sent her, with a present, to take care of Aunt Linnie right after Tommy was born. Aunt Linnie was perfectly healthy then, just tired from another baby, and Uncle Jeff was distracted with his new carpet business. With the noise of the party growing underneath her, Stef opened the door, walked into the dark room and sat on

the edge of the unmade bed, remembering:

Each one of Aunt Linnie's babies had looked the same to Steffie: lined with blue veins, chickeny and bald with an indentation on top of their heads as if they were branded to a race on a pileless, densely patterned planet. But they belonged to Uncle Jeff, with the same visible rims of white around each eyeball. His eyes protruded, too, like he was surprised to find you, or surprised that you found him.

Steffie walked up the steps to the second floor with her dead grandmother's jewelry box, holding it with the tips of her fingers so nothing would rub off on her. Her mother instructed her to give the gift to Linnie, she wanted it out of the house: "Just like my mother to leave it here for one of us to inherit. I'll be damned if I'm going to be the one to end up with the swollen belly and the cancer look in my eyes."

Steffie could picture the disease under the pearl inlays as gray spotted wafers. She placed the box on the dresser in Aunt Linnie's bedroom, far from the bed, close to Uncle Jeff's can of deodorant.

Downstairs Jeff Olsen was laying a rug in the living room, punching a tool with his knee to stretch the carpet so that it would lay flat against the floor. He dropped the tool, kicked it in, in a drop-kick, drop-kick rEach one of Aunt Linnie's babieshythm, stapling around the perimeter of the room. Steffie felt the vibrations. Her uncle owned Olsen's Carpets for a short period of time, and every room, including the kitchen and bathrooms were covered, filling the house with its own fibrous smell under funky layers: milk and drippings in the kitchen, and the toilets in the bathrooms were just missed targets for the boys.

Uncle Jeff yelled up to her in his pleading voice:(he and Aunt Linnie had all kinds of voices they used with each other, depending on the fluctuating mood of their relationship, and, at the very least, attached the diminutive "y" sound to everyone's name). "Make sure she eats her sandwich. Please. Then let her get some sleep. Tommy had her up all night."

Steffie pushed off her sneakers so she could feel the new multi-colored shag rug in the bedroom, the only carpet in the house you could hide your toes in.

Linnie's petite milky arm lay over her face in bed, her hair free from her usual messy bun, her small curls filled the space between her head and shoulders like low unruly bushes, burnt from too much sun.

"Steffie, baby," she said in her little girl voice and Stef was surprised she couldn't e-nun-ci-ate better. Any teacher would make her repeat. "Come here."

She reached for her aunt's hand.

"No, no, baby, here. This hand."

She wondered how she knew it was she, with her face still covered.

"How's my only girl," which is how she always referred to her. "I wish your

daddy got a chance to enjoy you. You remember him?"

No. If she thought about him, it was seeing him and that would make her dead, too. She closed her eyes. Floating. Driving in his leathery-smelling Caddy, so smooth, floating like a Cabin Cruiser over the neighborhood streets. The smoke shop. Taking the paper rings off his Antonio Cleopatra cigars and putting them on her fingers.

"Your Daddy helped me." She squeezed Stef's hand intermittently until she fell asleep.

Stef tried to think back, tried to think of her dad and Aunt Linnie and how he helped her. Nothing, really, except sitting behind them in his car, Aunt Linnie in the passenger seat. Taking her away.

Then the coffin popping open, Dad rolling on the ground. Did he hurt his head?

She noticed the untouched sandwich on Daffodil bread with the American cheese that was always in the Olsen's fridge without a wrapper. An empty pitcher and paper cup on its side. Just then she remembered more instructions from her mother.

"Make sure she always has fresh water so she can keep up with the milk."

The baby's cry was sudden and by reflex Stef squeezed her aunt's hand too hard, but she didn't budge. The basinet was on the far side of the large bedroom that was nearly empty, half in, half out of the closet.

She couldn't wait another minute to see and hold Tommy. She could already smell the baby powder. So much better than a doll, a warm wiggler in her arms.

Steffie stood up and the arm that covered Linnie's face fell to the side. She didn't recognize her aunt's mouth so thick and plum colored. She followed the trail of red dots. Some kind of rash or burn, to her swollen cheek. She knelt down next to the bed unable to move, longing to take Linnie's hand again. The baby continued to wail and for a moment Steffie thought it must be her aunt, she must be the one crying.

Stef turned away from the worn, thin pillows. She was sitting on the sheets where her aunt's small feet must have been just a few days ago. For a moment she imagined her, laying in the bed, her eyes embedded deep in her pudding face, her skin draped over her bones, her belly as swollen as when she was pregnant with Tommy. "Come here, baby, come to me."

Stef quickly got off the bed trying not to inhale. The cancer cells were floating, falling, melting into her skin. She backed up towards the door, planning to shower at home with the Betadine soap, and saw the jewelry box on the dresser, sitting in the middle of Aunt Linnie's perfume bottles.

"Mom's the one that should come to you," Stef said aloud to the image in the bed.

She could feel her insides being pulled into a drain. If she hadn't brought it

to her, she wouldn't have inherited the cancer from Grandma Dottie. She knew what was in the box and she brought it anyway. She did what her mother told her and now Linnie was dead.

Before she left the room she picked up a pencil and used it to lift the top of the box. It was so stuffed with bills and papers and prayer cards it didn't close. As she held the top open a loose, pearl inlay slid off and fell on the dresser. Click. She wrapped her hand in a tissue before picking it up and folded the tissue around it. Stef left the room, eyeing her mother's purse just outside the door, and slipped the piece in the side pocket next to her Lifesavers.

Stef crept down the stairway and could partially see the round robed figure of Father Boyle. Light reflecting off his shiny head, holding a dish of cheesecake in his hand. He was talking, shaking his fork. He turned everything into some fucking sick parable: "They pulled over on the side of the road after they got the diagnosis and held each other. Jeff Olsen promised his Linnie right then and there he was going to change his ways. This wasn't bad news. No. This was a *rebirth*."

Wasn't bad news.

She heard enough and had to get out before he tacked on his morbid clincher, the ones he was famous for that made everyone go silent. And what the hell did he know, being taken care of in the rectory, it had to be easier than worrying about your own family. And, God only knew the sick shit he might be up to on his own.

Stef went around the staircase, walked out onto the porch in the back of the house. There was an old rocker in the corner and she went to sit down in it, her face and neck moist from wanting to escape. Even her pearl necklace was too heavy.

"That's Mommy's chair," Tommy popped up. Blue stains from a snow cone decorated his small bare chest.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to sit on Mommy's chair. I really don't, Tommy." She jumped up. "Wanna play?"

"Play what?"

"A game."

"OK."

"Is my mom in the house?" Stef asked.

"Aunt Connie?"

"Yes."

"Guess so."

"Where should we play," Stef looked around the backyard, the chrome on

the bikes shining dangerously hot. Two beach balls reminded her of the smell of hot plastic. Of course, the Olsen's were deflated.

“Under the porch.”

“Isn't it gross down there? I have a dress on. Whatever.” Stef got up, followed Tommy down the steps and saw the opening kicked in through wooden slats. She stooped down, and immediately felt the layer of coolness slip under her.

It was a spacious playroom with a soft dirt floor turned from all of Tommy's running, rolls and rolls of old carpets piled off to the sides like bleachers. It smelled of rich soil, mildew and faintly of urine. She worried that there might be mice or even worse, she couldn't say the word. Small squares of sample rugs scattered around, marking off different sections. A beach chair, half empty of its plastic strips, reclined near his stockpile of weapons and glass bottles.

She followed the boy, unable to stand up straight. “I'm a Gorilla,” she said pushing out her chin, but he was unappreciative.

He picked up a plastic Bowie knife and shoved it in his front pocket. She hoped he was showing off for her.

“So this is where you cousins are cajoling.” A voice as if from within a cave. Uncle Jeff's pink eyes, his jowls a little forward in that position. His hand was deep in his pocket, jingling his change. She had forgotten about that noise of his.

“You showing your all-grown-up-cousin here your saloon? He doesn't allow too many down here, Steffie. You must be a special pardner.”

“I can barely get him to speak to me,” she said without looking. She could always do without his eye contact.

“The only other lady allowed down here was his mom. Can I stay, T.J?” He was already looking for a spot.

“Guess so.”

“Maybe I should go see if mom needs help up there.”

“Oh, you know your mom. She's taking control. Besides, I think you have an

admirer.”

Tommy pointed to the lounge chair so she carefully sat herself in it. He was warming up and she wasn't going to ruin it.

Her bare feet and legs in front of her, she was careful not to move with her short dress. She watched her uncle roaming around in a stoop like the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

She had forgotten how depressing they all were (except for T.J.)! Or, she never realized how depressing they were until now, back from school, where everything, even the silverware in the cafeteria, seemed steeped in some kind of proud 150-year-old history. Her friends, that she knew only casually, were all connected to legacies she was only beginning to understand. What she did understand was that she was not a part of these birthrights like the rest of the students.

A flash feeling of Mr. Porter. Watching him lecture.

She loved doing crew, the pull in her core, being out on the water, where she remembered her Dad, how they fished in a rowboat on Long Island Sound near their home. They cast for flounder not far from the shore. Her father appeared massive, hunched over the hook and bait, yet she was able to dip the oars in the water and pull him around.

It was a relief, walking in the wild and wooded areas on campus; taking a run around Turkey Pond, heated in the winters, where she could see the practically ancient koi fish; the massive stone dogs of the Kittredge building. She worked hard, so afraid that she would fail and be sent home to Pelham High School. To live with her mother. It was in her father's will that she must attend that school, and her mother called it *the school with the first squash courts in America! That's the country club my daughter belongs to!* The kids there were nothing like the kids here in Pelham, and not even close to the kids on planet Olsen.

She often wondered why her father insisted on this; he did not go there himself.

It made her love him more.

Lying in the beach chair, she felt the presence of Aunt Linnie, her girliness, the way her small hand reached for Stef's, how she held her niece's hand walking down the wide Olsen hallway, down to the kitchen, even opening the fridge. *My only girl needs a snack doodle.* She felt Aunt Linnie's hand in hers, under the porch, as if now Linnie's hand was the hand of a child.

My only girl.

Uncle Jeff put down a pile of rug mats near the end of her chair and sat down in Tommy's artillery area.

Uncle Jeff's face was close to her feet. The bottoms were covered in dirt. He inhaled deeply as if he enjoyed it. His protruding eyes so visible in the dim light.

"I'd give my right arm to teach at an institution like that. You don't know how lucky you are, Steffie, the exposure. You've been blessed. You know, you look like one of those students."

Blessed.

"What do you mean?"

“Oh, there’s a look. A tone of voice.”

Tommy held out his two small palms, offering her red tipped plastic bullets.

“Thank you, can I keep them for my gun?”

“Use them on the trail. Apaches.”

“I will. I will take them back to school with me. You never know. I run on a trail into the woods.”

As she described to the boy everything she saw on her runs, she had him. So grateful to focus her attention away from Uncle Jeff. He was listening intently, too, staring, as if she was talking to him. She felt so happy, being accepted by Tommy, she did everything not to grab him, press his face onto hers, and spoil it. At the same time she felt her memories press on her own cheek.

The rug burns on Aunt Linnie’s face.

She was about to ask the question, but the question choked her before she got to it.

She had to know.

“What’s wrong,” he said as if he was the kindest man in the world.

“Just thinking.” She could not stop the tears, and certainly didn’t want Tommy to see.

“She was so disappointed you didn’t come when she asked. She was, well, there’s no point now.”

“Asked?”

“Oh, come on now. You know. But she figured you were at your Ritzy school. And, you know how she was about grades. Come on. You’re a big girl. Certainly.”

“No I don’t know.”

“You ignored her message.”

“What message?”

“She left word many times, through Constance. She had something she wanted to give you.”

Jeff Olsen put his hand on her ankle, to stop her uncomfortable movements, and she pulled her leg up and away from him.

He stared up and into her crotch. She could feel his glare seeping into her

there.

Completely crept out.

The sound of Constance's crackly voice. Moaning.

Tommy was pulling his aunt under the porch from outside. She didn't like bending; her jacket from her suit was now off, her blouse pulled out and over her middle.

Constance spotted her daughter and brother-in-law.

"Steffie, Steffie get out of the chair. Now. What the hell are you doing Jeff Olsen putting my daughter in the chair my sister died in?" She made it to her with some difficulty and pulled her daughter out and started to brush the back of her dress off, her long arms, the back of her head. Stroked her hair. "Oh no, they aren't going to take you, too." She said under her breath, the one way she and her daughter were alike.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me Aunt Linnie wanted to see me Mom?" The rage had crept around and hardened the ridge of her nose.

Tommy was running as fast as he could around the perimeters of the area.

"She laid under this porch, for two days, and no one knew she was here. Dead." Constance said in a slow and rising rhythm.

"Tommy knew, Steffie, he just didn't tell anyone where she was. He wanted to keep his mother. We never thought to look here, didn't even know how she had the strength to get under here."

Jeff Olsen must have been crying, his hands over his face, and Steffie believed him.

Tommy ran out into the sun.

"I would have come, Mom."

"Yeah? Well, my sister wanted to give you the box, and I didn't want her to give it to you."

She felt Constance studying her, didn't know whether or not to believe her mother. She wanted to, but how could she. But, why else didn't her mother tell her, or want her there. Just because of the box? If she stayed longer, if she went upstairs, if she was alone with Uncle Jeff, she could find out.

Constance tried to stand up straight, but couldn't. When she spoke, her tongue showed off the color of a deep red rose from sucking on cherry Jubilee sour balls. "What if, Stefanie, what if she wanted to get you, too?"

Stef was relieved to have her hands in soap up to her elbows. She played with the water in the sink, looking forward to getting back to school, to

rowing and the speed of the skull away from all this. The Olsen dishes were full of chips and hairline cracks, so she slipped those into the trash, not wanting to handle them. The sun had gone down and the remaining guests moved outside. From the kitchen window she could see Tommy on her mother's lap, she was swaying back and forth but there was no music, just a low rumble of voices. She was going to send him a present from the gift shop at school. She would have to really look to find the right thing. The Olson boys were in the basement, blasting their music, vegging out. She noticed her mother's ring left on the windowsill, dried off her hands and put it on. It looked better on her, against her olive skin and long thin fingers.

She carried the dry dishes over to the pantry and noticed a musty smell. Linoleum covered the floor, so it couldn't be the embedded odors of the old rug. She put her ear close to the door, careful not to touch. The voices were coming from here, not outside. Chattering. Feminine voices, kind of old and kind of young. When she opened the pantry it got quiet, and the odor, like the smell of a drawer in one of her mother's antique desks at the store, intensified. Smiling for the first time all day, she imagined Grandma Dottie and Aunt Linnie on top of one another in the closet. Like conjoined twins. Arguing. Their heads shrunken, their bodies small and hidden in rags with no visible hands, sparse gray curls matted to their skulls. Hiding in the pantry like they could fool her. Coming back to get her. It was the way they did things. It was their family legacy. Damned if it was going to be her. Damned if she was going to be the one with the swollen belly and the cancer look in her eyes. She left the kitchen, and, seeing her mother's purse, picked it up so she could return it to her. The wrapped pearl inlay from Aunt Linnie's jewelry box that she hid earlier, fell out. She quickly picked it up, stuffed it back in, and looked for her mother, determined to put the purse in her hands, and, finally, to go home.

Maureen Pilkington just completed her collection, *Float and Other Stories this Side of the Water*. Her fiction has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Confrontation*, *Orchid Literary Review*, *Santa Barbara Review*, *Bridge: Art & Literature*, *Red Rock Review*, *Pedestal*, *Stone Table Review*, *Marco Polo Quarterly*, *Miranda*, *The Patapsco Review* and others. After working in book publishing, she received an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College, and is the founder of a writing program for New York City's inner city students.

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